

Some Thoughts on *Aiiiiiiiii!* in 2019

By *Shawna Yang Ryan*

On my office wall hangs a framed page from an 1886 issue of *Harper's Weekly* depicting, "A Haunt of the Highbinders in Chinatown." Along the right-hand side are illustrations of some of these highbinders—Lee Ah Fook, Chu Ah Lung—and at the top are their "favorite weapons": a butcher knife, an axe, a variety of swords.

The picture is a gift from my father-in-law, who was born in and grew up in San Francisco's Chinatown. His mother passed through Angel Island pregnant with him, and a family picture shows him in the arms of Presbyterian missionary and Chinatown icon, Donaldina Cameron. He represents what I've always thought of as the archetypical Chinese American identity, one linked to San Francisco, to Angel Island, to paper sons and the Chinese exclusion laws.

As a daughter of an immigrant from Taiwan, this history felt much more grounded in American soil than mine, a little bit mythical even.

When I return to the introduction to *Aiiiiiiiii!* in 2019 I think that my father-in-law might have identified with Chin and his colleagues' assertions about Chinese American identity.

In the 20th century there was a certain way of being Chinese American that *Aiiiiiiiii!*, depending on which embodiment we are talking about, helped to expose, rebuke, or dismantle—or to elevate. There was a history that it helped to restore. *Aiiiiiiiii!* set the terms of the conversation that I walked into as a writer, as an Asian American writer of Taiwanese-Chinese descent.

The moral sexual imperative of the white supremacist stereotype: hate yellow men ^(x1)

In college, the battle lines had been drawn before I even started writing, before I enrolled in Maxine Hong Kingston's workshop in 1997. By picking up the pen, I stepped into the middle of a longstanding literary rivalry and if I was to write, I felt that I had to choose a side. Reputation preceded Frank Chin: As a young Asian American woman, I read Chin and thought he seemed to be against us before we even knew what we would write, just because we were women.

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Now I see the introduction (the manifesto!) to *Aiiieeee!* as a declaration and exploration of decolonial love. Racism is often talked about as violence and disgust, but the *Aiiieeee!* editors accurately point out that “there is racist hate and racist love” (p. 8) and that racist love is a destructive seduction, keeping people silently comfortable and complicit.

The editors’ words are swaggeringly masculine, angry, provocative, and though I am unsettled by the heteronormativity of their depiction of masculinity, I’m also moved by how clearly they saw, forty-five years ago, the ways white supremacist thinking had shaped gender roles and even love between Asian Americans.

In my books, I wanted to decolonize the love of Asian American women and Asian American men. Sex is queered. There are no eunuchs, dragon ladies, or lotus blossoms. My male characters are desired. They are progressive, angry, ambitious, selfish, empathetic—in other words, complex humans. In *Water Ghosts*, the central male character, Richard, is seduced by white supremacy in his elevation of the white prostitute Chloe as emblematic of a kind of American success—get the money, get the girl. This is intended as a critique, and he suffers his wife Ming Wai’s revenge for his lapse.

Only Asian Americans are driven out of their tongues and expected to be at home in a language they never use and a culture they encounter only in books written in English (32).

哎呀! The editors lament the lack of an Asian American vernacular (though their language has all the piss and vinegar of vernacular speech: “the doughy clutches of an America hot to coddle something ching chong”—what a line!).

If there is a distinctive Asian American vernacular, I don’t know what it is. But I am excited by the moves to integrate our heritage languages and writing (without transliteration) into our work. I’m excited by the idea of a literary language that is as complex as our hybrid identities, that code switches seamlessly, without explanation. I have been trying this in my more recent work—to bring all parts of myself and my cultural identities and references into my work. To have the reader meet me, rather than going to meet the reader on their neutral ground (who is the “reader”?).

亞美朋友們，加油！

At some point the minority writer is asked for whom he is writing, and in answering that question must decide who he is. (21)

Is it only writers of color who are assumed to have to choose an audience, to split their intentions between white writers and their own communities?

Do you, my fellow Asian American writers reading this, also feel the burden of what Toni Morrison called “the little white man that sits on your shoulder and checks out everything you do or say”? (np)

After two books, I’m still answering that question, after every sentence, essay, story. Who am I declaring myself to be, especially as a mixed-race writer, who grew up both in Taiwanese-Chinese culture and white American culture? Has white supremacy settled so deep in my brain that I can’t feel it, nestled next to the nucleus of the neurons? To whom am I pandering in unconscious ways?

Aiiieeee! was a sort of interlocutor for a conversation about who we might be as writers. Would coming to our writerly identities be an argument or an agreement?

From 1973, *Aiiieeee!* still calls forward the question through the decades.

We are still answering.

Works Cited

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